



The School that I'd like - an extract from Neil MacKay's book,
"Removing Dyslexia as a Barrier to Achievement -
The Dyslexia Friendly Schools Toolkit"

(published with permission)

The School that I'd like

Imagine a school which acknowledges that all children learn in different ways and in which teachers harness the power of learning styles and preferences to optimise teaching and learning. In this school teachers also recognise that many apparent learning difficulties can often be explained as learning differences which will respond to changes in methods, materials and approaches. Also many of the special educational needs which formerly occupied the attention of class/subject teachers and SENCOs may now be seen as ordinary learning needs which are dealt with in mainstream settings through the differentiated curriculum plan. As a result the school is writing far fewer Individual Education Plans (IEPs): those that are written are of high quality, and are very carefully monitored and evaluated to actively direct and inform the way children are taught in mainstream settings.

This school is particularly aware of the needs of the growing numbers of non-traditional learners who do not function well in a didactic environment and who often think faster than they read, write, spell or do number work. Therefore there is a house style, evident in every classroom, in which children are required to explore ideas, concepts and strategies within the framework of their preferred learning styles. They are also actively encouraged to present evidence of their learning and understanding within these styles.

An interesting aspect of this school is the calm, confident way in which all children approach their learning. Even the most vulnerable learners are set up to succeed because they are effectively working within their comfort zones for much of the time and operating from a secure platform of strength and competence. When challenged to move outside their comfort zones they are able to respond with confidence because of their platform of previous success. One consequence of this confidence and emotional security is the positive way in which all children approach assessments, even some of those national assessments which seem to be carefully engineered to marginalise children who learn in non-traditional ways. Although this school is very successful in terms of results, it values this success less than it values its eclectic, confident and independent learners who are developing across the full range of ability and social, emotional and intellectual need.

This school is Dyslexia Friendly, without a doubt. However it is also learning friendly, seeking to empower all pupils to be the best they can be. That is the incentive for becoming a Dyslexia Friendly school.

The advantages are significant, with a positive "opportunity cost". However it must be understood that the implementation of whole school change needs to be the responsibility of someone who has the position, authority and support to drive the cycles of implementation, evaluation and review.

Perhaps it all hinges on the way ability or intelligence is viewed. For the purpose of this book, intelligence is defined as:

"Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do".

By this definition, an intelligent learner has an internal conversation which goes something like, "What I'm doing isn't working and I don't really know what to do here, so what I'll do is..." Yet there is still a residual belief among parents, politicians and some teachers and inspectors that the measure of intelligence is accurate reading, writing, spelling and number. While it is fair to say that more and more teachers are recognising that weak basic skills bear little relationship to ability and intelligence, this message seems to be slow to filter up to the policy shapers, as evidenced by current assessment strategies and curricular reforms. Teachers who believe that thinking and conceptual development are key measures of intelligence and who find creative ways to empower pupils to show what they know in a variety of ways are naturally Dyslexia Friendly because they are "learning friendly". They focus on strengths and use these strengths to address the unexpected problems that dyslexic learners seem to experience in certain areas.

The "unexpected" problems tend to arise in the acquisition and application of aspects of basic skills. These problems often occur despite adequate opportunity to learn and are highlighted against a background of ability appropriate skill acquisition in other areas. Dyslexic learners are usually as good as their peers at many things and are fine until, for example, they need to write it down. In the mainstream classroom where dyslexic learners spend most, if not all of their time, problems seem to occur in four main areas:

The School that I'd Like?

Run by idealists with a strategy

- Dyslexia Friendly = Mind Friendly
- Celebrating learning difference
- Recognising learning preferences
- Accepting work in different forms
- Developing emotional literacy

1. Visual sequential working memory - remembering what you see, in the order in which you see it, long enough to do something with the information. Weaknesses in this area contribute to issues like poor reading accuracy and identifying spelling errors.
2. Auditory sequential working memory - remembering what you hear, in the order in which you hear it and being able to hold it long enough to make an appropriate response. Following instructions may be a challenge, as will chunking complex words into syllables in order to decode them.
3. Information processing - the ability to process information and present it in an appropriate form. This information may need to be remembered from recent instruction or retrieved from previous knowledge and then selected and ordered to perform a task. Using a climate graph to write a holiday postcard about the weather requires information processing to select, order and present graphical information in narrative form.
4. Phonological awareness - being able to hear sounds in words and to associate the sounds with appropriate letter combinations. Implicit within this is the ability to break down and re-build words. Spelling and/or reading complex jargon words are often challenges for dyslexic learners, but if they can clap the rhythm and "stretch" the word, the parts become clearer and can often be written in a way which, if not correct, is close enough not to be a barrier to communication.

These four aspects may be considered to be largely "intelligence free" - most learners develop the skills at an ability appropriate level as the result of appropriate teaching and learning. The concept of "ability appropriate" is the key to an understanding of this issue.